

FINGERPRINTS

DRAWER

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APPEARANCE

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Abraham Lincoln's Appearance

Fingerprints

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection



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THE COLLECTOR:

A Magazine for Autograph and Historical Collectors

Vol. LXI, No. 12

NEW YORK, DECEMBER, 1948

WHOLE No. 679

THE COLLECTOR
Established 1887

Walter R. Benjamin *Autographs*



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LINCOLN'S FINGERPRINT

When autographs of more than ordinary interest turn up in the office, I like to tell readers of *THE COLLECTOR* about them. Sometimes such items may have been lying on our shelves for years, and it is only when we come to catalogue them that we discover the story which has until then remained hidden from us. So it was with a small, unimpressive Autograph Document Signed of President Lincoln, which had not seemed to deserve more than passing attention. That any Lincoln items should be treated casually may startle collectors. Yet Lincoln items have never been scarce, and in certain forms they are more common than in others. Fine letters of Lincoln may bring, as did one last winter at auction, \$5,800 for a single item, but the average handwritten letter is generally catalogued for prices ranging from \$150 to \$500, depending upon the contents.

About twelve years ago (I seem to be in a reminiscent mood), when my father, Walter R. Benjamin, was still active in the business, I remember a morning that was memorable in the history of our firm. The year 1936 was the very middle of the long period of depression, an era most people prefer not to recall. The prices of autographs were low indeed. Lincoln items, however, were not common in those days, and a small A.D.S., such as the ones today generally offered for \$25 to \$35, was then selling for \$125, if you

A Merry Christmas to All

THE EDITOR AND HER STAFF

could find one. Lincoln commissions on vellum, today priced at \$35, were regularly sold for \$75.

I recall this particular morning well. My father and I had come down together to the office, then located at 501 Madison Avenue. As he looked over the mail, I straightened out the room. I noticed him open a small package, and, after giving the contents and an accompanying letter a hasty glance, he let out a gasp. Well he might! The package was from the late James Meegan, a Washington book dealer, who occasionally handled autographs. It contained sixty-eight A.D.S.'s of Lincoln, some only two or three lines long, but others thirty to forty lines in length. Mr. Meegan was offering the lot to my father for the price of \$300. Neither of us could quite believe our eyes, yet Meegan was a reliable dealer and perfectly trustworthy. The speed with which our check went off need not be described.

The story of Mr. Meegan's discovery was never fully explained to us, yet we soon learned that the late Thomas F. Madigan, whose stock we handled, and several others among the dealers had bought almost equal quantities. We were later offered another batch of sixty, but we still had a plentiful supply of the first lot and refused the offer. So did Mrs. Madigan. We, however, have had cause to regret the step, as we have only one or two of this type of item left, not from this first group.

Whether these slips of paper on which Lincoln's writing appeared—most of them were


one inch by two inches in size or slightly larger—came to Mr. Meegan in this form, we do not know. All were endorsements written by Lincoln and cut from letters of appeal to him. These begging letters to the President have been referred to by many historians. To Lincoln, the kind and the merciful, the reading of these often heartrending appeals was a terrible chore, and yet one which he could not and did not choose to delegate. It was his custom to write on the back of each letter his note, referring the matter to the Secretary of War; or ordering a young boy, under age, to be returned to his parents and discharged from the army upon refunding his bounty; or issuing a pardon to a prisoner; or recommending the appointment of an officer, and so on endlessly. A complete letter of appeal, with Lincoln's endorsement, generally fetches from \$35 to \$75 today, and the price was higher in 1936. Only the cut endorsements, however, were offered to us. Some vandal, who believed that Lincoln's writing alone would be of value, and not the message of the petitioner, had, the story goes, cut out these endorsements of Lincoln from some hundreds of letters of appeal. The actual figure was never verified. Whatever the number, Mr. Meegan, surely, would never have perpetrated such an act of vandalism. The fact remains, however, that he acquired the group, from what source is not known, and disposed of them rapidly to the trade. Needless to say, this flood of Lincoln A.D.S.'s drastically reduced their price for a number of years. Now they have been mostly absorbed, and values are gradually on the increase again.

It is around one of these endorsements my story centers. Some weeks ago I had a request for an A.D.S. of Lincoln from a customer. I was about to send him on approval

the one reproduced below when a blot on the upper left hand side attracted my attention.

Suddenly I examined this blot, which I fear may not be here as clearly defined as it is in the original. I called Miss Ahern and asked her also to examine the smudge closely. "What do you make of it?" I asked. "Why, it's a fingerprint!" said she. "That is what it seems to me," said I. Then simultaneously: "Lincoln's?" We tried to think of every possible reason why it could not and should not be the fingerprint of Lincoln, but the sum total of our arguments added up to the fact that we could not see how it could conceivably be any one else's. We became properly excited, and still are. Silly, perhaps, but fun! If our reasoning is correct, it is the first fingerprint of Lincoln to be identified.

Visualize Lincoln seated at his desk, a mound of papers, urgent messages, and documents needing his attention piled up high in front of him. Wearily he draws a handful to him and begins to read. Perhaps in the same room his young secretaries are working. He takes the letter, from which our endorsement is clipped, and settles back in his chair to read the message of appeal—one of many he receives each day. This letter has not been read for him by one of a horde of secretaries and marked for his notation, as may often be the case today. He has not one secretary standing on his left, passing him a document for his signature, and another secretary on his right, holding a blotter ready to blot his signature and waiting to remove the letter from under his pen so as to make place for the next document needing his signature. This could not have been the case. Lincoln, a man of conscience, read his own mail and made his own decisions. No two secretaries could have stood alongside him while he perused each handwritten, often illegible,

 Let this man be chi.
cha yin
N. Lincoln
Feb. 17, 1865

message sent him, deliberated over his answer, and rendered that decision in writing. Each letter bearing an endorsement by Lincoln must have received from two minutes to five minutes at least of his attention. He would have been inconsiderate and wasteful of his secretaries' valuable time had he expected one or two of them to stand by while he undertook the reading of these appeals. And Lincoln was not a selfish man.

The chances, then, are that as he turns the letter over, preparing to write his message of mercy, he dips his pen in the ink bottle and begins: "Let . . ." The ink blots and leaves a wet ball in the center of the "e". But he goes on: "Let this man be discharged." Then his signature and the date — February 17, 1865—a bare two months before his assassination. Putting down his pen, he reaches for the next letter with his right hand, picking up the sheet he has just signed with his left to lay it aside. The thumb of that hand bears down firmly on the blot, leaving a clear, perfect impression of that finger. Lincoln's fingerprint!

Was our imagination running wild? In any event, our curiosity was aroused. The problem was to determine if any other known fingerprint of Lincoln existed which could be compared with ours. I immediately wrote to Mr. Paul Angle, Director of the Chicago Historical Society. His answer came back—he knew of none. I then wrote to the fingerprint division of the F.B.I. at Washington. Their answer was of equally little assistance. I had hoped they could analyze the lines and swirls of the print and tell me positively which finger was impressed on the paper. But their only answer was that, having no fingerprint of Lincoln available with which to compare ours, they could not help us. So an impasse was reached. Yet, in view of the facts: that the endorsement by Lincoln has been clipped from a letter, as the lined paper shows; that such an endorsement automatically presupposes in a conscientious man, as Lincoln is known to have been, the reading of the letter on which the endorsement is made, a matter of some minutes, surely—I believe no one but Lincoln could have left the fingerprint impression. As such an impression, my price on this unusual piece of *Lincolniana* is \$100, a valuation based, admittedly, not on the autograph, but on sentiment, and sentiment alone.

— M. A. B. —

APOSTLES' BONES?

Speaking of Mr. Angle, reminds me of a somewhat startling letter I received from him recently. The very matter-of-fact, business-like and formal tone of his note hardly prepared me for the offer he made me. His letter read:

"I attach copy of a newspaper clipping describing a set of reliquaries with accompanying documents which are still in our possession and which we would be glad to dispose of. Do you know of anyone who would be interested? The clipping is undated but must have appeared about twenty years ago." The transcript of the clipping was headed:

"APOSTLES' BONES, SO SCRIPT SAYS, TO BE
ON SALE THURSDAY"

and continued:

"A set of twelve reliquaries containing fragments which, according to an accompanying explanation written on ancient parchment, are bones of the twelve apostles, was discovered recently in the foreign section of the Gunther collection at the Chicago Historical Society. They will be for sale at the Society's building, Dearborn and Ontario Streets, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday.

"The reliquaries, with the bones, are contained in a tooled leather case said to have been made for them in 1729 at the command of the archbishop of Milan.

"The parchment text found in the case is written in ecclesiastical Latin and signed by the archbishop, dated July 18, 1729. The archbishop declares these bones to be of the apostles and commends them to the care of a priest of Vienna named Fabius Maximilian Gavetsy 'to have and to hold to donate and display for the veneration of the faith'."

Mr. Angle, knowing of my private collection of *Catholica*, may or may not have been serious in his wish to advise me of the recent discovery of the reliquaries in the Gunther collection. Perhaps he was measuring the degree of my gullibility. In any event, I gravely suspicioned him. His possession of a sense of humor is common knowledge. With thoughts coming to mind of the great French forger, Vrain Denis Lucas, who had so casually and successfully tossed off letters of Judas Iscariot and Lazarus, after his resurrection, both written in fluent French, I may be excused for looking upon anyone's possession of relics of bones of *all twelve* apostles with some degree of suspicion, even if



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At Miami University, OH, Student Finds Lincoln Fingerprint

Norman Oder -- Library Journal, 3/13/2009

- Letter in special collections
- Scholars say fingerprint allows comparison
- Project part of collaboration involving library

(This article first appeared in the March 12 issue of the LJ Academic Newswire.)

It's sure worth looking into the depths of special collections libraries, as a student at Miami University, Oxford, OH, recently discovered. While transcribing an 1863 letter written by President Abraham Lincoln, first-year student Lydia Smith noticed a smudge that she suspected could be Lincoln's thumbprint—and it was.

Go back to the
Academic Newswire
for more stories

The Papers of Abraham Lincoln, a project of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency and Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum, confirmed that this was the second Lincoln print found at Miami, according to the university's news service.

"Miami's collection includes the first certified document that provides a critical comparison for us," said John A. Lupton, associate director of the Papers of Abraham Lincoln project. "I have seen a number of fingerprints that I assumed to be Lincoln's, but never more than one in one repository. The fact that Miami has two makes it fascinating."

The 1863 letter was among hundreds of letters in Miami's **Walter Havighurst Special Collections** section of King Library that were uncovered this fall. The university's four Lincoln letters are all part of a larger Lincoln collection donated in 1967 by alumnus William A. Hammond ('14), who had amassed his trove over 30 years.

And why was Smith on the Lincoln trail? She's among 25 students involved in the "Whispers in the Words" project, which involves the transcription and recreation of historic letters. The project is led by Thomas Kopp, a professor in the department of teacher education, and Betsy Butler, Special Collections librarian.

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